

Committee on Government Administration and Elections

**An Act Concerning the Conveyance of Certain Parcels of State Land
Raised Bill No. 5520**

Testimony Submitted on behalf of the Connecticut River Gateway Commission

Mr. and Madam Chairmen and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding Raised Bill No. 5520.

My name is Melvin Woody. I am the chairman of the Connecticut River Gateway Commission. Thank you for giving us an opportunity to comment on Raised Bill 5520. Section 19 describes a land swap that includes an extremely important tract of riverscape within the Connecticut River Gateway Conservation Zone. As Torrance has explained, in 1973 this legislature established the Gateway Conservation Zone in order to protect this last unspoiled major estuary on the east coast from helter skelter, unguided developments that might destroy its outstanding public values. Or, more accurately, the legislature authorized the eight towns in the lower valley to establish a conservation zone with the help of representatives of the state Department of Environmental Protection. It was only after the towns designed and established the conservation zone that the Connecticut River Estuary was declared one of the last great places on earth and a wetlands of international importance, while the entire river was designated one of fourteen national heritage rivers in the U.S.. The legislature found that the river and the towns abutting it "possess unique scenic, ecological, scientific and historic value contributing to public enjoyment, inspiration and scientific study." The Gateway Commission is charged with preserving those values by administering a zoning compact designed by the towns and by protecting the historic, natural and scenic vista all along the river, for which purpose we have negotiated gifts and purchases of the in fee properties and scenic easements that Torrance Downs described in his presentation, often in collaboration with the towns, the local land trusts and the Nature Conservancy.

The commission has not had an opportunity to discuss the land swap described in Section 19 of this act since learning of it last Friday. But we did discuss the same proposal at some length when we heard about the same trade last year, when the governor refused to approve the trade. The executive committee discussed this proposal on Monday and has communicated with the rest of the commission by e-mail. We find that this swap does not make sense. It doesn't make sense to us financially, though that's up to the Properties Review Board – and it doesn't make sense measured by the values that the legislature and the towns have charged us with protecting. The seventeen acres the state would be trading present one of the most publicly important views in the lower valley. They are directly opposite the Goodspeed Opera House and the adjacent Gelston House Inn

and restaurant – and lie at the western end of the famous singing, swinging bridge between Haddam and East Haddam. The only other views I can think of that may be as often and openly enjoyed by the general public are the views from Gilette Castle and the Hadlyme Ferry and that from the Baldwin Bridge. According to the deed, the state purchased this land in 2003 because it “has high priority recreation, fishery and conservation value, and is consistent with the state comprehensive plan for outdoor recreation and the state plan of conservation and development *and should be retained in its natural scenic or open condition as park or public open space.*” (My bold italics.) I call special attention to this provision in the deed because it is not even mentioned in Section 19. Section 19 proposes to swap this land for 2.7 very flat acres at the south end of the Goodspeed Opera House parking lot, which have so little scenic value that they were sold to the Goodspeed for \$.50 – and for 54 acres in the Higganum section of Haddam that are hidden from the river and fall almost entirely outside the Conservation Zone. They do abut one section of Cockaponsett State Park, but are visible only from High Street in Higganum and, perhaps, from the opposite side of the Higganum Reservoir, which runs along the west side of High Street. We do not believe this is a fair or appropriate trade. We urge this committee to recognize that the unique natural, scenic and public values of the lands along the river far outweigh the difference in size of the tracts that section 19 proposes to swap.

I would like to emphasize that we object to passage of Section 19 of this bill *as written*. In the last two days, we have been told of a specific plan for the use of the tract overlooking the river. I have no comment on that plan except to note that no such plan is described in this bill and we find in the bill no assurance that any specific plan will be executed on this tract. As written, the bill has the effect of transforming 17.4 acres of conspicuous riverside land from a legally protected status stipulating that it should remain in a natural, scenic or open condition as a park or public open space into a prospective industrial tract, since that part of Haddam is zoned industrial. That change is clearly contrary to the purpose of the Connecticut River Gateway Conservation Zone and to the mandate of the Gateway Conservation Commission. I urge you not to approve Section 19 as written.

Thank you for your attention. I hope that in the future, the Gateway Commission will be given more notice of proposed legislation affecting land within the Conservation Zone.

J. Melvin Woody

Chairman

Connecticut River Gateway Conservation Commission